



## ARTICLE

# Teaching Case Law Vocabulary with Bingo

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“I like good strong words that mean something.” *Little Women*<sup>1</sup>

Law school is known for its demanding instruction and high academic expectations. In fact, the ABA’s standards for legal education dictate that “[a] law school shall maintain a rigorous program of legal education that prepares its students, upon graduation, for admission to the bar and for effective, ethical, and responsible participation as members of the legal profession.”<sup>2</sup> For first-year students, this “rigorous program” may feel completely overwhelming, and rightfully so. Students are bombarded with lengthy case law reading assignments peppered with unfamiliar legal vocabulary. This unfamiliarity causes students to spend an extraordinary amount of time reading, and so to combat the academic fatigue, I often tell my students to be patient with themselves because they are learning a new language. Even more so, for these future attorneys, I emphasize the importance of taking the time to learn these new words’ meanings because as the great Dumbledore reminds us, “Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> LOUISE MAY ALCOTT, *LITTLE WOMEN* 36 (Sterling Publishing Co. 2004) (1868).

<sup>2</sup> ABA Standards and Rules of Procedure for Approval of Law Schools 2024-2025, Standard 301(a).

<sup>3</sup> *HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS—PART II* (Warner Brothers Pictures 2011).

Despite my assurances, and despite my Harry Potter reference, the transition from undergraduate studies to law school classrooms continues to induce significant classroom anxiety for the 1Ls.<sup>4</sup> This increase of mental health challenges in law school makes sense because in law school, students are not only faced with a new and difficult field of study, but they are also expected to master their responses in a likely unfamiliar teaching technique, the Socratic Method.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to potential mental health challenges, first-year students also face potential life-threatening problems such as substance abuse and binge drinking.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, our 1L classrooms are where the avalanche of potential physical and mental challenges begins to form, and it gradually picks up speed until graduates often feel their “well-being is at an all-time low following graduation and preparation for the bar exam.”<sup>7</sup>

Although these challenges for 1L students are complicated and multifaceted, one small way professors may help to alleviate some stress of the 1L year is through the incorporation of teaching techniques students are already familiar—in particular, games! Games in the classroom have likely been a part of a student’s learning content since preschool, so students are more comfortable and receptive.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this sentiment is backed by learning theory. According to A.H. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, because the learning technique is familiar

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<sup>4</sup> See generally G. Andrew H. Benjamin et al., *The Role of Legal Education in Producing Psychological Distress Among Law Students and Lawyers*, 1986 AM. B. FOUND. RES. J. 225; Matthew M. Dammeyer & Narina Nunez, *Anxiety and Depression Among Law Students: Current Knowledge and Future Directions*, 23 L. & HUM. BEHAV. 55 (1999); Kennon M. Sheldon & Lawrence S. Krieger, *Does Legal Education Have Undermining Effects on Law Students? Evaluating Changes in Motivation, Values, and Well-Being*, 22 BEHAV. SCI. & L. 261 (2004).

<sup>5</sup> See Molly Townes O’Brien et al., *No Time to Lose: Negative Impact on Law Student Wellbeing May Begin in Year One*, 2 INT’L J. FIRST YEAR IN HIGHER EDUC. 49, 53 (2011) (summarizing data showing increased depression, anxiety, and stress reported during the first year of law school).

<sup>6</sup> Jerome M. Organ et al., *Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns*, 66 J. LEGAL EDUC. 116, 145 (2016) (stating findings that about one-quarter to one-third of respondents reported frequent binge drinking, misuse of drugs, and/or mental health challenges).

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Afton Cavanaugh, *The Next Generation Professional: An Opportunity to Reframe Legal Education to Center Student Wellness*, 51 HOFSTRA L. REV. 775, 776 (2023); see also Mike Robinson, 6 *Law Student Mental Health Statistics*, CLIO (May 2022), <https://www.clio.com/blog/law-student-mental-health-statistics> [<https://perma.cc/H3QQ-5ZA8>] (explaining that depression rates increase throughout law school tenure).

<sup>8</sup> See Donald B. King, *Simulated Game Playing in Law School: An Experiment*, 26 J. LEGAL EDUC. 580, 580 (1974); John Magney, *Game-Based Teaching*, EDUC. DIG., Jan. 1990, at 54, 54-55.

and comfortable, learning retention is increased.<sup>9</sup> In other words, students are simply more engaged in a physically and emotionally secure learning environment.

Increased retention is a good enough reason to implement this method, but games also work as a successful and effective tool because games provide for “increased motivation, more cooperation among students, and improved cognitive ability—justify[ing] its integration throughout the law school curriculum.”<sup>10</sup> Even more, games in the classroom help alleviate general stress by providing for a slight competitive discussion and because they are out of the norm for law school exercises—in short, they’re fun.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, this article provides a game that I have successfully used in my legal writing classroom, Legal Vocabulary Bingo.

## How Bingo Works: Nuts and Bolts

I typically introduce this content lesson around the third week of classes as the students are learning about cases as primary sources of law. By this point in the semester, the newness of the school is starting to fade, and the reality of the academic difficulty is beginning to set in.

Consequently, students have been receptive to this lighthearted exercise. In addition to case law and textbook readings, I also assign an essay by Orin Kerr, *How to Read a Legal Opinion: A Guide for New Law Students*.<sup>12</sup> As Professor Kerr explains in the preface, he designed the essay “to help new law students prepare for the first few weeks of class. It explains what judicial opinions are, how they are structured, and what law students should look for when reading them.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to breaking down the parts of a judicial opinion and how to

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<sup>9</sup> See generally A.H. Maslow, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, 50 PSYCH. REV. 370 (1943). Although this learning theory involves much more depth of discussion than provided here, in general, this article aims to make the point that in order for students to effectively learn and reach their full potential, basic needs like food, safety, and a sense of belonging must be met first; essentially, a student cannot achieve success on higher-level cognitive tasks if fundamental needs are not met. See *id.* at 370–71.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer L. Rosato, *All I Ever Needed to Know About Teaching Law School I Learned Teaching Kindergarten: Introducing Gaming Techniques into the Law School Classroom*, 45 J. LEGAL EDUC. 568, 570 (1995).

<sup>11</sup> See *id.* at 570–73 (arguing that incorporating games and play in the classroom enhances student experience and retention through a form of play learning).

<sup>12</sup> Orin S. Kerr, *How to Read a Legal Opinion: A Guide for New Law Students*, 11 GREEN BAG 2D 51 (2007).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 51.

read them, Professor Kerr defines common terms found in opinions, such as “plaintiff” and “damages.”<sup>14</sup>

## A. The Prizes

Before playing the game in class, the first step is to accumulate the prizes. I collect local law firm swag and merchandise, usually for free, with the multiuse purpose of aiding in networking for the students, engaging our students with local firms in our communities, and exposing the students to various practices of law. I may also pick up a bag of candy (allergies permitting), raid the admissions closet, or, if I am feeling especially generous, I will grab a few \$5.00 gift cards for local coffee shops.

## B. Creating the Game

Legal Vocabulary Bingo works mostly like traditional Bingo. Creating a Bingo card for legal vocabulary is simple and can be done using various online generators that offer customizable templates for classroom use. Websites like [BingoCardCreator.com](http://BingoCardCreator.com) and [MyFreeBingoCards.com](http://MyFreeBingoCards.com) allow educators to generate cards with random combinations of words, or they can create tailored cards with specific legal terms.

If I have more students than the number of unique Bingo cards that can be generated, I print duplicates and allow for more than one winner. You can also customize the grid size and add a free space if desired.

Below is an example of what the Bingo card looks like using [MyFreeBingoCards.com](http://MyFreeBingoCards.com):

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 55.

Case Vocabulary			
Appellant	Complaint	Remand	Summary Judgment
Per Curiam	Venue	Statute	Burden of Proof
Dicta	Affirm	En Banc	Precedent
Affidavit	Jurisdiction	Directed Verdict	Appellee

myfreebingocards.com

### C. Calling the Terms—Definitions, Synonyms, Descriptions

To play the game, instead of calling out the words themselves, I will read the definition, a synonym, or a description of the legal term as explained in Professor Kerr's essay. For example, the definition of "disposition" could be:

- *"The final settlement or conclusion of a case, often referring to the court's decision or judgment."*

Students mark the corresponding word on their Bingo card while I keep track of the terms I have called. The calling continues until a student exclaims a "Bingo!" and the student must tell me which terms were marked off the card for my approval. If Bingo is warranted, the student wins a prize.

A typical game with a five-by-five grid lasts about 20 minutes (the larger the grid size, the longer the game), but if the game ends too early, we either play again (knowing that a lot of students could Bingo, so make sure you have enough prizes), or we simply discuss what is left on the card through an interactive discussion.

Throughout the follow-up discussion, we discuss the correct answers as well as which terms were familiar and those that needed clarification. I then ask students to highlight or circle these terms in the reading for their other classes, so they can see where they may fall within the opinions, and to keep this Bingo card for reference when they are reading their cases for other classes. Students will discuss where they have seen these terms in class, and we talk about how students should work to incorporate these terms in their speaking and written vocabulary for all their courses.

This discussion is one of my favorites of the semester. Because the game breaks the ice and students are in a positive, playful mood, the post-game wrap-up is usually much more relaxed and freer flowing. I have found that it is an excellent way to build camaraderie at the beginning of this first year.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Legal Vocabulary Bingo is an effective and fun way to teach legal terminology by reducing stress in the classroom. By incorporating this game into the curriculum, professors can engage students in a positive, interactive way that makes learning complex legal terms less intimidating. The result is a more engaged classroom, stronger retention of legal vocabulary, and a greater sense of community among students—just what first-year law students need as they begin their academic journeys.